

VAB Volunteers Association for **B A N G L A D E S H**

July 2002

NEWSLETTER

As we head into the second half of the 2002, VAB looks back at an auspicious six months of fundraising. The generosity of our donors amounted to \$15,675 in pledges and grants. Several VAB officials plan to organize and host meetings in their homes to introduce and generate support for VAB in their communities. Three VAB volunteers are researching and targeting corporate donors. Through continued efforts, we aim to raise a total of \$50,000 this year so that we can increase our support for the education and training of underprivileged students in Bangladesh.

New Additions to VAB

This year, VAB proudly introduces four new Associates.

Mrs. Dewara (Bela) Chowdhury of Glastonbury, Connecticut is a schoolteacher and an active community leader. Mrs. Chowdhury has made a commitment to promote VAB to her community and will suggest to her friends and family to make contributions to VAB in lieu of gifts for upcoming celebrations (such as birthday parties).

Mr. Ali Hayder, a retired senior city official of Chicago has expressed an interest in becoming involved in VAB activities.

Mr. Mujib Hoque of Queens, New York is a freelance TV journalist and producer. Mr. Hoque has been designated as our Advisor in charge of contacting and developing relationships with local Bangladeshi media.

Mr. Frank Pagani, President of a corporate and marketing communications firm in Ardsley, New York, has accepted the position of VAB Director of Public Relations. His role includes generating VAB publicity and engaging the support of high-level personalities and community members for VAB.

Fundraising Efforts

During the first six months of 2002, certain officials presented VAB to their friends and community members at informal meetings and through letters. These activities proved to be effective in both fundraising and in generating new ideas for VAB activities.

We would like to thank Dr. M. Gani Chowdhury and Mrs. Dewara Chowdhury of Glastonbury, Connecticut for hosting an informal meeting at their house at which VAB President discussed the program.

VAB Associate, Mr Peter Von Christerson, a retired Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) from Seattle, Washington has contacted through letters 140 PCVs who worked in Bangladesh during the early sixties. VAB Advisor, Mr. John Pike, past Chair of the Board of the United Way of Westchester and Rockland has contacted through letters 18 of his friends and associates. In order to gain higher levels of funding, VAB Directors, Mark Armbruster and Frank Pagani are working together to identify and target corporate donors. Another VAB Director, Mr. Richard Grant is planning to organize an informal gathering of some prospective big donors in September. He will also explore support for VAB from international development institutions.

VAB Video

VAB Director, Mrs. Raihana Islam is currently in Bangladesh visiting various VAB funded schools and computer training centers. While there, she will meet with students and trainees and create a video of VAB activities. Mrs. Islam will present her video and share her experience in Bangladesh during her fund-raising meetings in New Orleans, Louisiana.

News from the Field: Scholarships

By March of 2002 scholarship applications from twenty schools had been reviewed, and 202 awardees were selected. While most of these students received VAB scholarships in 2001, local committees through an open and well-publicized competition selected them from over 750 applicants.

The VAB scholarships make it possible for the students to continue their secondary education by paying the costs that they and their families cannot afford—tuition and fees, books and supplies, selective tutoring and school dress. The depth of poverty of the students' families can be gauged by looking at the average household income and the size of these families. Their average monthly household income is between \$17 and \$35. The median family size is between 6 and 7 members, which represent 40% of all the students' families. Another 25% have 5 or fewer members while the remaining 35% had 8 or more members. Thus, each family member has to get by from an about \$2 to \$4 per month. Most of these poor families earn their livelihood from agriculture, either from small farming or day laborer (63%). About 30% earn their income from mostly non-agricultural activities-- small business, service or self employed. And

about 7% are totally jobless, living on charity and very occasional work. Small business includes various types of vendors, petty traders on market days and others running small shops or tea stalls. The service category includes teachers, office work, and drivers; lift operators while self-employed covers tailoring, rickshaw and van pullers, carpenters, welders, weavers and maids.

Finally, the vast majority of students (7 out of every 10) receiving scholarships are from the last two grades 9 and 10 in high school while the remaining 30% of scholarships went to students in grades 7 and 8. As secondary education in Bangladesh is not fully funded by the Government as in the U.S., the VAB scholarships are helping to bridge a serious gap in the lives of underprivileged but bright and talented youth.

Two such students are **Md. Masud Rana and Md. Hannan**, both of whom would not have been able to afford to attend school without VAB's assistance.

Md. Masud Rana is a ninth grade student in Mohjidpara High School. He ranks 9th in his class and is an excellent, eager student. However, for Masud day-to-day existence has been a constant struggle and has impacted his ability to focus on his studies. Masud was born into poverty. His father left home when Masud was an infant. After his mother remarried and went to live with her new husband, Masud was left in the care of his uncle. Today, Masud contributes to his family's subsistence by working as a day laborer. Because of his enthusiasm to learn, his school's principal, Mr. Md. Sajedul Alam, has taken Masud under his wing and has helped him through the courses that Masud has had to miss. Masud's scholarship from VAB-Prakritajan has enabled him to purchase a complete set of books, writing materials and even a new uniform, all of which are luxuries for this keen student. When asked how he felt about his scholarship and achievements, Masud was unable to speak because he was in tears.

Md. Hannan's family is similarly poor. His father is a landless day laborer with four sons and three daughters. Hannan is expected to help his father in the fields; as without his help, his family would struggle to put food on the table. However, with his mother's encouragement and support, Hannan has convinced his father to let him work in the fields after-school and during holidays so that he can continue his education. With the help of his VAB-Prakritajan scholarship Hannan has achieved the ranking of fourth in his class. He is currently attending ninth grade of Mohjidpara High School, Sapahar, Naogaon.

For every VAB-Prakritajan scholarship, there is a similar story to those of Masud and Hannan. We aim to more than double the number of scholarships we provide next year,

which will help improve the lives of many more impoverished Bangladeshi children.

Program News: Computer Training Centers

VAB has established seven new Computer Training Centers so far this year, including two in Nabinager-Brahman Baria, and one each in Jessore, Phulbaria-Khulna, Bancharampur, Fulgazi-Feni, and Parashuram thana-Feni. Each center has four computers and one printer integrated in a network.

These centers are organized on a tripartite support base: VAB provides full equipment including furniture and onetime partial support for trainer for one year; local people provide free premises and utilities, and Prakritajan provides training and managerial support funded by the fees from trainees.

Instructors were hired from local areas for all the centers and a four-month course with six modules for training computer operators has started. Enrollment has been strong in all the centers, with an average student body of 22. Students are learning the fundamentals of computer use and Microsoft Word. They will continue on to learn Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint and Access. Many students have shown interest in learning graphics programs such as Adobe Photoshop.

All instructors have received computer training from well-recognized institutions. They are very enthusiastic in teaching computer courses for these centers. They are: Mr. Mohammad Yeasin, B. Sc., B. Ed. (Fulgazi Center); M. A.; Mr. Abdul Motaleb Majumder, B. A., B. Ed. (Parashuram Center); Mrs. Ayesha Akhter Narmin, M. Sc., B. Ed. (Jessore Center); Miss Atiqua Chowdhury, B.A. (Khulna center); Mrs. Fauzia Towhida, B.A. (Nabinagar 1 center); Ms. Rahela Begum, B. Sc. (Nabinagar 2 Center); and Miss Shamima Begum, B. A. (Bancharampur center).

VAB Awardees Excel in Final High School Examination

Results of nation-wide Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination held for 2002 shows that all but two of the 44 VAB scholarship holders that appeared have passed successfully. For VAB awardees, the passing rate is over 94% as against the national average of only 39%. Out of 42 passed, 16 received A, 23 B, 2 C and 1 D. We offer our hearty congratulations to our awardees and wish them well in their future endeavors.

Thanks to everyone for being so helpful and cooperative in making VAB more successful this year. More details on VAB are available on its website: www.vabonline.org. Contributions can be sent to VAB, P.O. Box 234, Irvington, New York and as always, they are tax-deductible.